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The Relocation of English

… I SPEAK ONLY ENGLISH!
I don’t speak England …
—zekrypton (a user in an online forum)

7.1 Introduction
The picture that emerges from the discussion that has unfolded in this book so far is one where two antithetic narratives about the relocation of English run along parallel lines: the academic discourse narrative and the public discourse narrative. On the one hand, the academic discourse narrative tells of an English language that has been transplanted in different parts of the world and describes the ways in which this linguistic re-rooting has been accompanied by local processes of acculturation. It also describes how these, in turn, have given rise to varieties of English that have reached different levels of development, stabilisation and recognition. On the other hand, the public discourse narrative tells of an English language that, because of its worldwide diffusion, is constantly under threat of corruption by the negative influence of local languages and cultures. One sees the acculturation and consequent diversification of English as a positive and necessary phenomenon producing beneficial liberatory effects for its users, while the other sees it as counterproductive and detrimental to the effectiveness of global communication.

In this chapter I argue that this difference is only apparent and that the two positions are actually two expressions of the same essentialist conceptualisation of the English language. Subsequently, I make the case that the study of EIW is best approached from an entirely non-linguistic point of view so that the relocation of English is considered not a matter
of linguistic form but one of linguistic re-balance, both on the world stage and within each individual’s linguistic repertoire.

7.2 Focus on form

One point in common between the academic discourse narrative and the public discourse narrative is that both are concerned with the sounds, the lexis, the grammar, the syntax and the pragmatics of EIW. In particular, they are interested in the ways in which these deviate from the norms of what Wierzbicka (2006) calls ‘Anglo English’. As was seen in Chapter 6, in Malaysia, the dominant discourse portrays the local use of English as being marred by an unrelenting process of deterioration. This decline in quality is considered to be directly proportional to the perceived degree of localisation of the English language. In other words, the more English appears to have a Malaysian character, the more it is considered corrupted, flawed, broken or a rojak. And so the public discourse stresses the importance of conserving a ‘pure’ form of English, faithful to its Anglosaxon ancestral roots. Linguists in the field of EIW focus on exactly the same thing, the rojak, albeit from a different perspective. They tend to see the relocation of English fundamentally in terms of the degree to which nativised, localised and acculturised forms of English differ from the norms of ‘Inner-Circle’ English. And so the questions raised both in the public discourse and in the academic field of EIW are essentially the same: How and why does English vary in the world? How and why do the different varieties deviate from the original form? What is the level of development, recognition and codification that these varieties have reached? Which English is most suitable for people to learn and use?

In fact, bahasa rojak and ‘pure’ English are conceptually equivalent sides of the same coin. The idea that there is a ‘rotten’ form of English entails the possibility that there exists a pure form too. The notion of the diversification of English and its pluralisation into Englishes assumes that somewhere there must be a singular, non-diverse form of it: no matter what attitude one has about the causes or the consequences of it, deviation requires norm. As Wierzbicka notes, “arguably, it is this Anglo English that provides a point of reference for all the other Englishes, one without which the notion of Englishes would not make sense either” (2006, p. 9). If world Englishes and English as a lingua franca are variations of English, it means that they are not the ‘original’ English. Therefore, even if a case is made and accepted that distinctive features are to be seen as markers of the legitimate acculturation of English in